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DEDICATION SERMON

AT CONWAY.

BY

Rev. CHARLES B. RICE.

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SERMON

PREACHED AT THE

DEDICATION OF THE HOUSE OF WORSHIP

OF THE

Congregational Church in Conway, Mass.

DECEMBER 16, 1885,

BY

REV. CHARLES B. RICE,

Pastor of the First Church, Danvers.

BOSTON:
Congregational Sunday-School and Publishing Society.
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SERMON OF DEDICATION.

PSALM 100: 3, 4. Know ye that the Lord he is God; it is He that hath made us and not we ourselves; we are His people and the sheep of His pasture. Enter into His gates with thanksgiving and into His courts with praise; Be thankful unto Him and bless His name.

WE have abundant reason to-day for entering into this place with thanksgiving and praise. There are with us many occasions of grateful reflection.

For yourselves, the present members of this church and society, you have first that reason for satisfaction which belongs with the successful completion of a great and useful work. The end of a work is thus better than its beginning. And this you have finished prosperously. You have built a house, comely, commodious, convenient, and strong; and it is done.

Then you have the further comfort that the work is paid for. A building is not done until it is paid for. And sometimes when such a building is not paid for at once, it may happen that before the payment is finished the people may wish the building had never been begun. You may be grateful to-day and give thanks that you have finished the whole work.

You have reason for thankfulness also in that you have done the work with a good heart and a united purpose among yourselves. When your former house was destroyed, it came as an early thought into the minds of many friends of this church, here and abroad, that the loss might possibly prove the means even of good, by that power with which a great and difficult enterprise draws more closely together those that enter upon it and that carry it to a successful close. Nothing scarcely can unite us more firmly together than work for an end that concerns us all, and that calls for strenuous and concerted effort. Sometimes, indeed, a people may fail at such a point; and the occasion has its perils. But if they do not fail, they grow more strong than if the trial

had never been put upon them. So we believe it will be with you.

As to the location, you might easily have had differences of feeling and of honest judgment. And we may not be clear, perhaps, that this spot would have been most wisely chosen if the matter had come freshly before you, and if no previous conditions of ownership, of preparation and association, had drawn you here. But, under all these conditions, few, I think, will doubt the wisdom of the course you have taken.

The hill at the westward of this spot, high and dry above fogs and floods, of a light and wholesome soil, seems to have been prepared expressly for setting upon it the homes of men. It is likely, I think, in the future, to be more largely occupied for this purpose. If a passage were made to it by a permanent and elevated bridge over the brook and ravine at the west of this house, an easier way might thus be had, not only to the residences upon the hill, but also, perhaps, — notwithstanding the ascent to be encountered, — to a considerable section of the town lying toward the southwest. And the opening of such a way might contribute to restore to this spot its appropriate and fairly central location. If the town itself might not be expected to construct such a bridge, for a special purpose like this, it may be that some prosperous son of the place and of this church, among those that have already given with liberality toward this building and for other public enterprises among you, may add this also in the stretching over this valley an arch of iron or of stone. The permanent advantage would be great. And I do not think that a more valuable investment could be made in behalf of the church and society.

And here a further occasion of thankfulness comes to our minds in this: that you have received such generous aid from these friends scattered abroad, former residents and members of the church, some of them — children of the town and the church, as they may all be called. This is a pleasing and valuable and a solid portion, in reality, of the wealth of many of these New England communities, that may be losing otherwise somewhat of their population and of their relative importance, that they have this inheritance in their children, who are gone forth from them, but who

keep through all their lives their filial spirit, and who are ready to give aid in undertakings for the maintenance and adornment of the ancient household seat. And these ancestral communities themselves, with their churches and Christian homes, have well deserved such remembrance and aid.

Such help has come thus fittingly and liberally to you from several of your prosperous sons and daughters; others among them have remembered you with interest and with kindly thoughts and words, and in prayers for your prosperity, though not able otherwise to render you the assistance they would gladly have given.

You have another occasion of grateful reflection, in that, in this building you have restored, you are continuing and carrying forward a work in which our fathers, the first occupants of this town, and their descendants the members of many of our families in the intermediate generations, have taken so great an interest. This which you have done is itself a filial work with respect to those that have gone before us.

Upon this topic of the history of this church in connection with its places of worship, and with respect to the distinctive personal and religious characteristics of the former members of the church and society at certain periods of its existence, I should have been glad if I might have spoken to-day with some fulness. I have been the more desirous of doing this, because, through misapprehension, or in some manner, in the account prepared at the centennial celebration of the town, there was an omission to give such a sketch respecting this church and society as might fairly have been admitted. The review itself would also be worth the making. But I have been wholly unable, during the very short time that has been at my disposal, to prepare it in thoroughness; and it was better, therefore, that it should not be attempted. A few names and figures only may be given, and some brief reflections made upon them.

The settlers of Conway attended meeting at first in Deerfield, the mother-town, so far as they were able. Later they met in the dwelling-houses of some of their own number. They sent occasionally for ministers to be with them. John Emerson preached for the first time in a barn in the eastern part of the town, on the

ninth of April, 1769. The first meeting-house was built, in part, and outwardly, so to speak, in the summer and fall of this year, 1769.

Our fathers had work for head and foot in finding a place to set it. In this matter, though they meant to be both righteous and judicious men, yet, after the fashion of the times, they laid their judgment literally to the line and their righteousness to the plummet. They perambulated the township repeatedly and mightily, with chain and compass, to find its exactest centre. They found it once at a fitting spot; and again they found it not, or found it slipping aside into an unbecoming marsh. But leaving at length their geometrical righteousness in a bog, they went with practical and Christian wisdom to build in the open valley southward from us, and upon that slight elevation on which the South Centre Schoolhouse now stands. This spot continued for more than seventy years to be the municipal centre of the town, and largely, also, its ecclesiastical and religious centre, — for the town and parish then were one. And this neighborhood was also later, and for a long period, the seat of the "Select School," not to be forgotten by any of those who enjoyed its benefits.

The town building committee for the meeting-house consisted of Joseph Catlin, Nathaniel Field, Elias Dickinson, Jonathan Whitney, and Thomas French.

The first town meeting was held in this house on the twenty-fifth of September, 1769. Religious meetings began to be held there at about the same time. Mr. Emerson's ordination as pastor was on the twenty-first of December of this year. It may be doubted whether the building was ever dedicated by any special service appointed to that end. It may almost be said that it was never finished. It received continual finishing and furnishing, improvement and enlargement.

It had been voted at first that the structure should be thirty feet square with ten-feet posts. It may not be clear whether it was actually set up of this size or somewhat larger. It was greatly enlarged in 1795 and 1796; if, indeed, there had not been some enlargement before. This was the period when our town had its largest population. The final dimensions of the building were 100 feet by 60. This length may have included the porches

at the northern and southern ends. The steeple, which bore a clock, was above the northern porch. Its height I do not know, but the more athletic of the youths were able in their plays to cast a lightly sailing stone over its top. There were doors at either end from the porches, and also a principal door at the middle on the eastern side. From this eastern entrance the main aisle ran to the lofty pulpit on the opposite west. The pews were square, and aisles ran around the whole room, distant from the outer wall by the width of a single line of pews. Rivulet aisles, with narrow and angular channels, reached the two or three pews in the interior spaces which the principal passageways did not touch. I remember the place of the Sunday-school class to which I belonged, in one of these inner pews. But the infant class of that day had its room in the neighboring hospitable house of John Howland, where also the "Social Library" of those days was kept. Wide galleries supported by wooden pillars swept around the house, saving the western side by the pulpit. There were rows of windows above and beneath the galleries. Some of these windows, I am told, are still in existence; and I do not know but it might be well if one or two of them were set within this present house, for the light they might shed upon any "new theology" that might ever be attempted here to be put forth. These deep galleries gave occasion of evil often, we have been told, to the lads permitted to occupy them, and in the days when the glory and terror of the tithing-man were passing away. I have seen, I think, or at least have heard, of the wooden tops, not piously whittled from the ornamental turnings upon the walls of the pews, and while the service was going on below. But the lads of well-regulated households sat with their fathers and mothers.

The building was a spacious structure, altogether respectable and well suited to its uses, for the times in which it was built. In many of its features it was not unsuited to the uses of any age.

I do not know for what reasons precisely it was judged necessary at length to replace it with another house. But I suppose it was for the need of extensive and costly repairs, and with the thought that the people would be better accommodated in a structure wholly new.

This having been resolved on, the geometry of our fathers was gotten again upon its feet, and fresh measurements and computations of distances began to be made. The territorial centre of the town had long before been shifted, by the large addition made from Shelburne on the northwest. And the centre of population having also moved to the northward, it was proposed to change the site accordingly, and many wished it taken as far as the "Flat," and to the neighborhood of the Town House that has just been built. The discussion was sharp, and it went near to an utter and total division. But wiser counsels, with the efforts of peace-loving men, again prevailed. The opposing sections were drawn at successive meetings nearer and nearer together, till they came, as it was observed, to "within a musket's shot." And then with a rational and friendly impulse, and upon a timely suggestion, they threw down — in a figure — their arms, and went together, dividing evenly the distance between them. And here, upon the narrow edge of this ravine, with many toilsome but cheerful labors of preparation upon the ground, they set up the walls of the second house. Many of us remember the work of hands and teams given upon it, and the men that worked.

The building committee were Asa Howland, Joseph Avery, Austin Rice, John Howland, and Gardner Dickinson. The master builder was Alonzo Parker. The size was fifty-two feet by eighty; and the cost was $7,000, which does not, I presume, include the work in preparing the site. There was a single shapely steeple at the eastern end, within which the bell from the former house was put. The town contributed, I think, $500 toward the building, and it had the use of the hall in the basement for its public meetings. There needs no further description of a house so lately standing. It was dedicated August 31, 1841; the [redacted] of building having been [redacted] The discourse at the dedication was preached by the Rev. Samuel Harris, the pastor, from the text in 1 Cor. 1: 18. The prayer of consecration was offered by the Rev. Theophilus Parsons, Jr., of Shelburne.

This house, full to us of precious memories, was destroyed by fire, February 27, 1885. The cause of the fire is supposed to have been a defective flue or pipe. Prompt measures were taken for

began the preceding autumn.

its restoration. A building committee was appointed, consisting of Carlos Batchelder, John Packard, Darwin Sanderson, Edwin Cooley, Jabez C. Newhall, and Addison Brown. Plans were prepared. Daniel Rice, a son of the town and the church, and a workman also upon the former building, returned to direct the work of construction, and it has been done in strength and thoroughness. And we enter to-day gladly within it.

The pulpit of the first meeting-house was occupied for more than fifty-six years by the first pastor of the church; though for a portion of this time he had a colleague in labor. Mr. Emerson received 580 persons to membership in the church. He baptized 1,219, and he followed to burial 1,037 of his people. He preached the gospel faithfully; and prayed in the latter portion of his life, it might almost be said, incessantly. His death occurred on Monday, the twenty-sixth of June, 1826, he being then eighty-one years old. He had the two sermons ready for preaching on the Sabbath before, and would have preached but for the coming of a brother minister to visit him. He was the only pastor of this church that has died while holding here the pastoral office. I trust you may return in this somewhat toward the ancient usage.

In his half-century sermon, preached December 26, 1819, Mr. Emerson referred to the choice that must soon be made of a successor, and gave admonition to his people in words appropriate to the present time.

"I do, indeed, believe and feel confident that my people will not be willing long to remain destitute of a spiritual guide and teacher, statedly to administer ye word and ordinances of ye gospel to them, without using any means to obtain one. Yet have been not a little concerned least by a variety of opinions and differences of views and tastes, or something else respecting ye object, and by ye subtile arts of ye grand enemy of ye gospel who incessantly seeks to sow discord in a church and society, and, if possible, prevent ye settlement of ye gospel among them, or influence them to make choice of an unsanctified or unfaithful minister. These reasons excited apprehensions least you should be thrown into unhappy dissentions and animosities, and so be scattered abroad on these mountains as sheep without a shepherd, or have one who by corrupt doctrines and practices mislead ye souls of men and occasion their eternal ruin.

"In an affair of such vast importance . . . the utmost prudence

and caution, wisdom and mutual condescention, are required, joined with earnest supplication to him with whom is ye residue of ye Spirit for all that light, direction, and guidance that is necessary to a happy result. And may ye God of ye spirits of all flesh in due time place over this church and congregation an able, diligent, faithful, and pious minister of ye everlasting gospel, who shall be an instrument of building ye Redeemer's kingdom, and continue for many years a burning and shining light in this golden candlestick."

Thus does he, though long dead, still speak to you. And may this his counsel and prayer be ever followed and fulfilled among you.

Many able and faithful men have since filled the pastorate. The church itself at first numbered thirty-two members. The earliest enumeration following that I have seen is for 1829. The members were then 243; and the numbers had probably been nearly the same for many years before. In 1840 there were 302; in 1850, 334; in 1860, 334; in 1870, 267; in 1880, 206; and the number since may have decreased a little further. It was in part, though by no means wholly, for reasons connected with the business interests and the thrift of the town that the years following from 1840 were so prosperous for the church. Changings of populations, and the formation of other churches since, have contributed to reduce somewhat its membership. But thus far the Lord has led you on. Numbers are not all. And with his blessing on you, and with your own continued faithfulness and steadfastness, the work of the fathers and mothers here, and your work, will not fail, and will not miss its full reward.

But besides all that looks toward the past, and beyond whatever in this occasion is local or personal or peculiar to yourselves, there are other reasons for satisfaction in what you have done.

You have builded an house for Christian assembling and for the public worship of God. Great interests, sacred and precious to man, have place with such an event and such a building. And it is with cause on such grounds that you enter to-day into these his gates with thanksgiving and into these his courts with praise. There are reasons adequate for what you have done, and you

would be able to render an account with a clear mind to any who might question you concerning your work and your gathering here to-day.

The setting apart of a place for the public worship of God and for the uses of a church in Christian instruction and fellowship, is a thing that has a special significance respecting the nature and ends of human life. The house of God sets forth in itself a certain view respecting man, as to what he is, and as to his duty, responsibility, and destiny. It signifies that man is capable of a religious life, and that he may be, and ought to be, religious. The worship of God implies and declares that man has a spiritual as well as a natural being; and that he is concerned for the things that belong to his spiritual existence. When we raise a house of worship, and when we enter together into it, we make acknowledgment, as if in these words of the Scripture, that the Lord he is our God, that he has made us, and that we are his people and the sheep of his pasture; and that we have thus some bond of likeness with him, our Maker, and some obligations and possibilities of love and trust toward himself. This view of human life as properly and essentially spiritual belongs to all the worship of God; and it is that which is most distinctively set forth in the work you have here accomplished. Others may hold some different thought — you may yourselves, in the practice of life, fall away too far from this, but this is that which these walls declare, that your human life is spiritual, and that its ends are with the Father of your spirits. This declaration you may make with hope and grateful confidence, and you may have rest upon it.

We hold thus, as Christian worshipers, that man has spiritual relations with God, an unseen Spirit, infinite, immortal, and holy; that these are his highest relations; that man lives and moves and has his being in dependence upon this infinite Spirit; that he owes to him homage, obedience, trust, and love; that man is himself a spiritual being, constituted in some high degree after the image of God that made him; that he should seek acquaintance and fellowship with God, and full moral likeness in his own soul to God; that the soul of man is that which is highest within him; that the end of life is in growth and strength and purity

of soul, and that the gain, the substantial property and possession of life, is in man himself, in the quality and substance of his own soul, and in the alliance of his soul with the Father of spirits; that the concern of life for man is thus of what sort he is himself, and of how he stands before God, the Maker and Judge of men; that man does not die or perish utterly at bodily death; that it is possible to lay up within the soul of man possessions for a coming immortal state; that great preparations may now be made for that approaching state, and must be made if we would enter happily and safely upon it; and that great and special provision has been made in the Christian redemption, and through the coming of the Son of God to the earth, for the deliverance of man from the evils that beset his soul, for the giving him, though he has sinned, acceptance with God, the holy and universal Ruler and Judge, for bringing man into a closer union with God, and for leading and strengthening him in a life of endless spiritual prosperity and blessing.

This is the theory at least of religion and of man that we hold and declare as Christian worshipers of God. For such beliefs this house is standing to-day. The house of God is a building of witness to man's spiritual life. It is a testimony to spiritual endowments with man, and to the instinct and desire and hope and worth of man as not mortal.

We raise stones of memorial by the graves of our fathers, to keep their names in remembrance and to mark the places where their bodies rest, or the places from which their bodies appear to vanish shortly into the elemental dust of the earth from which they sprang and into the bosom of the nature that nourished them. But the house of God is the monument we rear to the faith that the fathers have not perished and will never die. It is the monument of the immortality of man. It is a visible mark we set upon the landscape of the earth, among our dwellings and our places of business, that we account ourselves to be not wholly of the earth, and that we have cares and occupations and affections that belong with the household of God.

This is our doctrine and hope of life. The belief, at least, is not light, and the hope is not poor.

As to the reality or certainty of these truths or beliefs, they

give of themselves, we think, some proof of realness in the impression they are fitted to make upon the minds of men in the very setting of them forth. If they are not fully admitted and practically followed by all men as true, they are such that the most of men, clearly seeing them, must admit that they deserve to be accepted and followed. If something of evil or of darkness or of heedlessness with men sometimes hinders the following them, there is here, at least, one of the uses of the house of God, that its services are fitted to aid in removing this hesitation in obedience to the most high and hopeful instincts of human nature, and to assist in bringing the life of man to a more perfect agreement with his own best thoughts of that which it ought to become.

We have little space for evidence concerning our Christian faith; but we may quickly name such lines of proof as may justify this work of building that is here completed.

It is desirable that this Christian statement concerning life should be true. It is best, if it is true, that man should have something in himself real and enduring, in which he may lay up possessions. It is to be chosen that he should not die and perish, with all that love him and with all that he loves, as the grass of the field; that it should be possible for him to gain himself a soundness and purity of soul conformable to that moral law, the force and beauty of which he feels perpetually bearing upon him, and of which he thinks that it comes forth from the Author and King of men, and that he should, in fact, have himself an infinite Maker and Father in the world of spirits, able to uphold and counsel and keep him, and able to bring him, with all those that share his affection and his trust, to his own bosom and into his glory, — these things are to be desired, that men should live and die in hope. In these states of mind, and with these illuminations of conscience and reason on us, to say that such beliefs are to be chosen is going far to declare of them that they must be solid. That which seems in such lights to be most fitting is not likely to be all unreal. These are the lights of life, and this is a portion of the ground of all our faith, that the world of human hope is not built on vanity and falsehood, but on the word and purpose of a living and a true God.

This substance of belief concerning man and God has been widely and generally held too among men, and this is a part of the proof that it is true. So has much error and evil prevailed in the world, — we grant it. But we distinguish between the deep, under-running and apparently fixed beliefs of men, and the incidental and changeable errors that may cleave upon them. Man, in whatever blindness of mind or darkness of heart, has been much disposed to somewhat of worship. And even of the most darkened worship we accept this as true, that a sentiment of divine homage is in it, that it is of human nature and human life, and that it is significant of the origin and quality and destiny of man. This instinct and law of dependent, rational life we desire to follow in so much of truth and purity as we may have light to gain by the sight of reason, and from the Father himself of lights, whom we mean not ignorantly to worship.

In further proof we see that this sense of the being and spiritual presence of God, and of man's kinship in life with God, has its own direct, original, and permanent grounds of fixedness upon the minds of men, so that it does not seem likely quickly or ever to pass away. The thoughts of man upon himself and the things about him confirm and declare these fundamental truths of religion. The unseen Author of being and life is not far from every one of us. We say, indeed, that we have not seen his form, nor heard his voice, nor known exactly with positiveness and as by natural sense or irresistible demonstration of reason, of his presence with us. We have not thus seen and known him. But we can not in our most active thoughts appear even to ourselves to depart from him. We may not have fully weighed this certainty with which we judge ourselves concerning his nearness to us. An unseen power is ever about us and within us. The substances of the natural world around us subsist and move under an impulse of universal and unchangeable and irresistible might, and in steadfast and unsearchable but most certain wisdom. A force for which we have a name, but unseen and unknown to us, holds to the sun the globe we stand on by a strength reckoned as great as of wires of iron set over the whole earth thick as the grass of the summer's greensward. An invisible power upbuilds the structures of nature. All its motions are in regularity and

by method of law. The grass comes forth and the flower in spring, unchanging in its kind, unfailing in its answer to the rains and returning warmth, filled in all its substance with life and touched in all its form with beauty. The tribes of the animals, bird and beast, insect and fish, have their powers of motion and will, drawn from a source not seen with our natural eyesight; and a most mysterious and discerning instinct often that guides them unerringly in ways unknown to man. And man has his bodily life, of the quality and substance of which he has no perception, over which he has nothing of direct control, and not a single portion of which will fail for a moment, while he has no thought upon it, to do its work by means and rules and in an order of its own. He has his mind, his thoughts themselves, that overlook the earth, the grass and flowers, the bird and beast, that outpass the sun and stars; his thoughts that survey themselves, and his own being that thinks upon itself, and that search for causes and reasons and grounds and ends of life and being. And he has discernments of obligations, and knows of a power bearing upon him and binding him concerning duty and respecting truth and love and rightness and grace of life, and a power that tells him that it is itself before all things else to be observed by man. This force bearing morally on the mind of man is universal and supreme to his thought, and certain even as the forces of the natural world. It can not be fled from in any darkness, so that a man might say, I am hidden from it, and it is not binding on me. It can not be cast off by anything of human force, so that a man could say, I am more strong than duty, and it has no grasp upon me. And of this pervading power, and of all manifested intelligence, and of all the ordered force of natural life and of the material world, it is most easy and most rational to think that they have together one Source, and that they are of that Being whom we here acknowledge and worship.

If there are those who think these beliefs are to perish, we do not ourselves agree with them. If ever we should fear that they were failing with ourselves, we might most fittingly wish to come thus the more together to hear more truly concerning them and to pray and worship, that such fears might cease, and that better

thoughts and hopes might prevail within us. But the unseen power and spirit upholding matter and life, and ordaining righteousness, is not to depart from the thoughts of men.

It is certain, too, that special signs have been given to us from God through orderings of his providence respecting men, and through appearances of God to man, with revelations from God, and with a record in all this of his care for men corresponding to what we might expect from the Father of our spirits and the God of life. He has sent counsel to men concerning their lives by special messengers, inspired to speak for him. He has sent One to be with men from himself, and of himself; full of wisdom and power and grace, as from God, and as God; compassionate toward mankind; careful most for the souls of men, as befits the holiness and wisdom of God; mindful of the sacredness of the law that forbids and condemns the sins of men, as becomes the Governor and just Judge of all; providing freely for the forgiveness of sin, while he makes clear its evil; entering, though from God, into the life and state of man; suffering and dying for the sins of men, and in sympathy with human, mortal weakness; rising from the dead in proof and exercise of powers with him not mortal, and with hope for man concerning the resurrection of the dead, and ascending successful to heaven, with promise to prepare with himself a place for all that will trust and follow him; leaving and sending abroad among men a spiritual presence and power testifying of himself, moving mankind toward repentance and faith, filling the hearts of men with new thoughts concerning holiness and concerning God, with new feelings of charity and brotherhood toward one another, and with new hopes and aims concerning the life to come, setting up in the world a power, a kingdom of fellowship and faith and hope and love that has stood and spread, enlightening mankind, transforming human societies, and growing in clearness and force and promise, despite the resisting darkness and sin of men, unto the present day. The Christian revelation and the Christian faith, the Christian spirit and the Christian church, are certainly in the world, with all their force of testimony concerning God and concerning the estate of man.

By all these things, by the witness of human desire and hope and expectation, by the testimony of human instinct concerning

God in the practice of worship, by the perpetual and commanding presence of powers as from God around and within the being of man, and by the dealings of Providence, and the great record of revelation and the life of the Son of God, and by the nature and progress and power of his work in the world and upon mankind, — by all these proofs we are confirmed in our faith concerning the spiritual nature of man, and concerning the possibility that man may live as the child of God and the heir of immortality.

And to these proofs, or as belonging with them, we might add, out of our own experience, the comfort itself and rest of worship before God and of faith and obedience and love toward the Lord Jesus Christ. These experiences, so far as we reach them, are not dark to us, nor unsatisfying, nor in any wise wholly doubtful as to their quality or reality. We know that it is best for us that we should have pious and reverent thoughts of God and of Christ, and should submit our lives to a divine direction, with a divine love and hope within us. I think there can be no one here that by trial of his own and in his own heart, has learned the contrary of this, and no one who can do more fittingly or wholesomely for himself than by revering God and trusting the Gospel of his Son.

Thus we have a reason to give for our Christian religious faith, and for our works that grow out of it. To this end you have built this house of God, because you are permitted to be the children of God, and because all your highest thoughts and best desires are concerned for that spiritual life which may here be nourished and purified.

You have not built this house as if we might not worship God in any place ; but because in some ways you can worship best, or only, by assembling together. You strengthen one another in religion, as in all the great common concerns of life, by your presence together. You speak of common spiritual interests. You pray in common dependence and desire and faith respecting common necessities of natural life and of domestic, social, and public welfare. You give praise with many voices joined in song. You study the Scriptures and hear instruction from them, prepared with care by one set apart, in your behalf, to the study of the Word and works and thoughts of God. This requires a place for your assembling.

In all these things, too, you find your present lives strengthened and profited. You are directed and confirmed in right living with one another by the worship and teaching and by the associations of this house. You form friendly acquaintances in the best spirit and toward the best present ends. You learn to bear one another's burdens, to speak the truth in love, to honor all men, to love and serve your country, and to follow after all things honest, just, pure and of good report. And while your teaching here is not infallible or complete, and while, still less, your practice in life is not perfect, yet you aim to be better and are better for what you learn and do in this place. For present uses alone, letting go the life to come, you might well build and maintain the house of God.

But you do not do it for this alone. And you take it as part of the realness and weight of the spiritual nature of man, that all things concerning human society and present human life are added most fully and hopefully to you when you are seeking first this eternal righteousness of the kingdom of God. The fitness of the services of religion to improve the daily quality of life belongs with this view we hold of the spiritual nature of man and of his nearness to God. While we draw nigh to God in worship, and nourish our souls with truth and grace from him, we are best prepared for all our ordinary labors and duties. I trust that your daily lives will be so improved by the ministrations of this house that they will furnish, fairly, this evidence of the reality of your Christian faith.

This house of worship is thus to you a place of spiritual life. It is the house of God; and therefore the house of man as the rational child of God. It will stand continually as a sign that you do not need to live, and do not mean to live, by bread alone for your natural bodies, but by every word of truth and hope and grace that proceedeth out of the mouth of God for the nourishment of your souls. It will be to you a house of rational praise and worship, and trust and help concerning life.

But even if ever to any of you these thoughts concerning a spiritual state and life for man should grow dim and distant, and if the unbeliefs that are always abroad should disturb you, and doubts should come upon you, as there may be doubts in our

human weakness concerning all things not visibly seen, you may know that here in the house of God, and in all the thoughts themselves of God and the Christian Gospel that you may keep in your hearts, will be the best relief from every such fear and darkness. And besides, as to our immortal state, and the trust we have of passing to it and of transporting something from our present lives over upon it, in so far as any doubt might ever rest upon such a prospect, it might be gathered both from reason and from revelation that our hopes of entering into a secure immortality belong with present preparations for it; and that even in a natural order we shall gain or strengthen our hold upon a higher and more permanent and prosperous existence by our present adopting, so far as in our human weakness we may, of all its rules of life, by our use of all its powers, by our grateful acceptance of all its offers and alliances of friendliness, and by the patient and strenuous nurture within us of all its opening instincts and capacities. Thus while we endeavor to look at the things not seen or temporal, and to exercise our faith and our hearts upon them, our lives may reach themselves to somewhat of the form and substance of the things eternal, and we may begin, though encompassed still with earthly frailness, to be clothed upon more certainly and steadfastly with our house which is in heaven. We strengthen the principles of immortality within us while we use them; and fulfil in part our most precious faiths as we follow them. And after the great promise of nature and the Word of God, if we sow to the Spirit we shall reap of the Spirit everlasting life. This hope, this purpose, and temper in life, you will here in this place of prayer and thoughtful worship be strengthened to maintain. These great preparations, needful in the present and for the coming state, you will here be urged and assisted to make.

And indeed the Scriptures speak concerning human life as if the present being of man might itself become a temple of God. The most sacred dwelling of God on earth is not, we know, in houses made with hands, but in the spirits of those that are humble and pure and contrite before him, and that rejoice in his coming and presence. While you occupy this visible house of God, you will the more have care to present before him in purity

and fulness of welcome this inner sanctuary of your souls, in which he will most delight to dwell. And thus, though these walls may perish, or though you may cease, as you will all shortly cease, from your coming within them, there will remain to you, and you will become yourselves, the everlasting habitations of God.

I believe that so far as we might bring to mind the lives of those that have passed from among us from the fellowship of this church, either in these recent years or in the earlier generations, we should find evidence of benefit with them from the Christian faith and from the public services of religion. They were not perfect in their day, as we surely are not in ours. They made no profession of an unblemished character. They did not rest for acceptance before God upon their personal holiness. But they did seek, so far as these powers of Christian truth were upon them, to do good after their ability and opportunity, and to reach some conformity in life to the mind of God. And they did not wholly fail. If, before a great audience of this people, like the one here assembled, there were slowly read the names from the roll of membership in the church that are marked with the sign of departure, and if there might be with each one a calling to remembrance what we could of the person and the life, I think, after every allowance were made, there must remain upon such an assembly the deep impression of the worth with these our departed friends of the Christian doctrine they endeavored to follow. The power of the Word of life has gone abroad also here throughout the whole community, and has wrought great results of good in the lives of many whose names were never upon the records of the church.

Assuredly, also, in our own reviewing of the lives of our friends that have passed before us, the things that concern us most regarding them are these that belong to inward character and the state of the soul. We call most to mind, not their outward conditions or their possessions, but their goodness of heart and uprightness of spirit. And out of all that we keep of their lives, we could spare the least these thoughts we have of what they gained themselves in the riches of a heavenly temper and a

Christian faith. In all such judgments we pronounce upon the worth of those departed from us, we testify to the truth of these beliefs concerning the soul of man as the chiefest portion of his being. We declare ourselves concerning life that it is a life not meant to be outward and earthly, but a life appointed of right by its Maker to aims that are spiritual and ends that are with God.

The shortness of these earthly lives comes also to-day affectingly to our minds. Of those who saw the opening of our first house of worship, none for many years have remained. Comparatively few are still remaining of all that ever worshiped within it during the three fourths of a century, almost, while it stood. The most active builders also of the second house had ceased from their coming within it before the flames consumed it, and a great proportion of the early worshipers are not with us. If the houses might have remained, the assemblies within them would all have changed. We look in vain along these aisles and throughout these pews and in the unaccustomed seats of the singers, for the familiar faces and figures of the former congregations. The households are also broken, the homes of domestic life; and from many of the farms and fields the names of the men that once owned and tilled them have passed away. Lo, this is not our rest! These are not the ends of life. This is not its hope.

We rejoice to-day in the trust we have concerning the numbers of those departed from these earthly possessions and these convocations of mortal worshipers, that they have entered the land of final promise and have joined the sacred assemblies of the just in their perfection and their everlasting felicity. We shall most fittingly honor their memories, while we fulfil their desires and their prayers, by continuing here their labors in the Christian faith and in the Church of God. Making ourselves ready also, while we maintain their work and follow their faith, to renew our own acquaintance with them in the security and blessing of the heavenly country to which they have passed. And for themselves, if it is still permitted to them to have knowledge concerning us, or if ever they are present unseen about us, — though they may not break for us the sacred silence of the eternal state, — we may not doubt that it is upon these occasions, upon these Christian

assemblings, upon these plannings and labors upon whatever is wrought by us for the kingdom of God on earth, and upon whatever is seen to be gained within us of the holy likeness of God, that they look down with the deepest interest and the purest joy. Their most affectionate regards and all the most friendly solicitudes of the world of spirits must have respect to our faithfulness in duty, and to the steadfast direction of our lives in obedience and trust toward their own heavenly inheritance.

But of the constant and animating and faithful presence of the Author of life and the Father of our spirits, we are made to be sure. He will be with us in the coming years, and with the children after us. He will give to us continuing evidence of his power and wisdom and grace in the worlds of natural life and of intelligent being. Clothed with might, he will still set fast these surrounding hills, whose beautiful and unchanging forms have been familiar to us from the first sights of childhood. He will send upon them the early rains in their season and the quickening sunshine, and will touch their sides and summits with the greenness of the spring, renewing forever the face of the earth. He will send forth from off them, as in the former days, the pure springs into the valleys which run among them. He will make these pastures to be clothed with the summer flocks, and these valleys to be covered with the autumn corn, and wrapped with the snows of winter. And when we ourselves shall have long ceased to behold them, these orderly successions of seedtime and harvest, of the cold and heat, the day and the night, with all the life of the earth they uphold and nourish, will declare to the coming and fleeting but rational and grateful generations after us the glory and faithfulness of God. The tokens of his presence will appear also in the souls of those that love him. The Sun of righteousness will shine above them. Fruits of grace will continue to be brought forth in their lives; and we trust they will appear more abundantly and richly throughout all the coming years. Thus the voice of prayer and praise and the comfort of faith will never depart from these homes of men.

Toward all these uses of religion you will find this building helpful. We hope that the flames and storms may spare it, and that your children and the children's children may see it. The

word of life will be made known here, we trust, in continued faithfulness. You will be moved here to repent of sin and to receive the forgiving grace of God in the faith of Christ. You will keep here the ordinances of the Gospel, which are full of light and peace. You will be here in friendliness with one another in prosperity and gladness and in sorrows also and times of darkness. The children will come in the lightness of their hearts. The young men and maidens will meet together. The strong, the busy, and the burdened will be here, and the aged also and the weak, laying down the labors and hopes of life. In all your coming you will be here as the children of God, and as those led by his hand, with much of present blessing toward another and better country. Your lives will declare, we trust, in plainness that you seek it. And when you cease from your assembling here, this earthly house of God may yet become to the certain passage of faith as the gate of heaven, introducing you with final blessing into the presence of him to whose service it is now devoted, and fulfilling thus with all its believing worshipers the sacred hope in which its walls are reared.

And may the King of grace himself arise and enter here to his rest. And may his glory fill this house, and his peace abide within it forever.

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